

Vowell-Snowden-Black House  
619 S. Lee Street  
Alexandria  
Virginia

HABS No. VA-709

HABS  
VA  
7-ALEX,  
170-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20240

## VOWELL-SNOWDEN-BLACK HOUSE

HABS  
VA  
7-ALEX,  
170-

Location: 619 S. Lee Street, Alexandria, Virginia

Present Owner: The Lee Street Corporation

Present Use: Residence

Statement of Significance: The Vowell-Snowden-Black House, certainly one of the outstanding examples of the Federal "row" type buildings in Alexandria, has fortunately been spared the fate of suffocation. By precept and example it stands flush with the street, but with its extensive grounds and breathing space preserved to this day.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: A building date, 1798-1800 accords with the architectural design, woodwork details and critical comparison with contemporary examples.

Thomas Vowell, Jr. acquired the property in a deed granted August 29, 1798 by William Thornton Alexander and Lucy, his wife, for the yearly ground rent of \$61.66.

Actual construction probably began about this time. The Alexandria tax records are apropos though not entirely clear as to the date of completion. In 1800, for instance, the house was valued at \$1,000 for tax purposes when still unfinished, but the following year the assessment had jumped another \$250. As assessments were usually made in the spring of the year, the indications are that the house may have been finished late in 1800. As a matter of passing interest 1802 brought steeper taxes through assessments that were double or triple what they had been in 1800 and 1801. The figure for Thomas Vowell's property accordingly jumped to \$4,500! However that same year Vowell was able to cancel out his annual ground rent obligation to William Thornton Alexander upon payment of £ 200.

2. Architect: Unknown
3. Original and subsequent owners: The house was built by Thomas Vowell, Jr., who with his brother, John, operated

for a long time a successful mercantile business.

The firm of John and Thomas Vowell owned a large wharf on Union Street between King and Prince Streets and sent out its own ships to the far corners of the world. But the wine of success oftentimes intoxicates and propels businessmen into buying and selling property without restraint. This is what happened to Thomas Vowell, who "by reasons of losses and misfortunes in trade" was forced into mortgaging his business, even his home which he was forced to part with.

On September 1, 1817 an advertisement read: "FOR SALE - The House and Lot occupied by the Subscriber, on Water-street, 28 feet front and 40 feet deep, with covered way pantry, a large kitchen, smoke house, and also a brick stable, carriage house, etc. on Franklin street; it has a front on Water Street of near 150 feet, and binds on the corner of Franklin 88 feet 5/12th inches; the garden is spacious. THOMAS VOWELL"

On February 27, 1826 another advertisement read: "FOR RENT OR SALE Brick dwelling house on Water street near Gibbon lately residence of the subscriber. ... carriage house and room for three horses and a cow. THOMAS VOWELL"

Finally on June 18, 1829 an advertisement read: "TRUSTEE'S SALE - ....3. A large two-story brick Dwelling House and half acre Lot at the intersection of Water and Franklin streets, now in the occupation of Mr. John Adam...the house was built and finished throughout in the best manner, and has always been well taken care of: the coach house, stable, smoke house, etc. are of brick and there is a pump in the yard."

The subsequent owner was Lawrence B. Taylor and Edgar Snowden, Sr. acquired it from him in 1842. The property remained in the Snowden family until 1912. Justice Hugo L. Black of the United States Supreme Court acquired the property in 1939, soon after his appointment to the Court in 1937. Black's widow held the property until 1973 when it was acquired by the Lee Street Corporation.

4. Builder, contractor, suppliers: Local. In view of the interesting use here of Aquia stone, the following advertisement appearing in The Columbian Mirror and Alexandria Gazette for February 23, 1796 has a special pertinence:

F R E E S T O N E

Warranted equal if not superior in quality and colour to any on the continent.

We have commenced the Stone-cutting business at JOHN DUNBAR'S Quarry on Aquia Run, Stafford county, Virginia, which we mean to carry on in its various branches in the neatest manner--those gentlemen engaged in building at any seaport in the United States may be supplied (with at least) the ornamental parts of their houses at a moderate expence, as by preparing the stone at the quarry, there will be a great saving in waste and carriage. Those who think proper to apply to us may be furnished with any article in our line for building, as well as tomb and head-stones, chimneypieces, steps, platforms, &c. &c. and know our terms by calling on ----- Charleston; (S. C.) Mr. Alexander M'Robert, Richmond; Messrs. John Proudsett & Co. Merchants, Norfolk; Col. George Gilpin, or Col. Dennis Ramsey, Alexandria; Mr. John Debloise, Merchant, City of Washington; Mr. William Robb, Merchant, Baltimore; Messrs. J. Warder, Parker & Co. Merch'ts, Philadelphia; -----, New-York; to whom specimens of the stone will be sent the first opportunity, and orders left with either of the above gentlemen, or forwarded to the subscribers shall be punctually attended to by

JOHN HENRY & CO.

Aquia, near Dumfries)  
1st Feb. 1796 )

N. B. We will give generous wages to a few  
good stone cutters.

J. H. & Co.

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I WILL FURNISH FREESTONE BY THE ton, quarried agreeable to the dementions ordered, and deliver it along side a vessel in Aquia creek, (Potowmac river,) where any may load with safety that does not draw above ten or twelve feet water, for terms (which will be made convenient to undertakers and others) apply as above or to

JOHN DUNBAR.

Aquia, near Dumfries,  
1st Feb. 1796

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Items in early Alexandria newspapers attest to the Vowell brothers' activities:

On October 4, 1787 - Virginia Journal and Alexandria Advertiser noted: "THOMAS VOWELL has just opened at the store formerly occupied by Mr. Thomas Conn, on King-Street near the corner of King and Royal Streets, a LARGE QUANTITY of READY-MADE CLOTHES Suitable to the season, and a variety of DRY GOODS, which he will sell low for cash or any kind of country produce."

On November 22, 1796 an advertisement read: "JOHN AND THOMAS VOWELL have removed to Union Street, near Mr. Alexander Smith's, where they have for sale Rum in Hogsheads, Apple Brandy in do., Mould and Dipt Candles, Sugar and Coffee in barrels, Coarse and Fine Salt, and a number of other articles ..." Vowell, Jr. also served as an officer for several banks in the city as well as transportation companies.

The Snowdens were long prominent in Alexandria. Samuel Snowden from New Jersey settled in the old town in his youth and in 1800 became owner and editor of the paper now known as the Alexandria Gazette which traces its ancestry to 1784 and claims to be the oldest daily newspaper still published in the United States. His son, Edgar, succeeded him as editor. Edgar was mayor of Alexandria and first representative from Alexandria to the State Assembly after Alexandria returned to Virginia. He was succeeded by his sons Edgar, Harold and Hubert in the management of the paper.

The most illustrious occupant of the house, Supreme Court Justice Hugo Lafayette Black, was born in 1886 in Harlan, Alabama. After receiving his law degree from the University of Alabama in 1906, he practiced law in several Alabama cities. He served in the United States Senate from 1927 to 1937. In 1937, he was appointed an associate justice in the United States Supreme Court, a position he held until his death in 1971.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary and unpublished sources: Alexandria Deed Books B, pp. 195, 485; B-3, p. 329; L, p. 209; Q-2 (1826), p. 195; Alexandria Tax Records: 1800-1802.

2. Secondary and published sources:

Alexandria Association. Our Town 1749 - 1865. Likenesses of This Place & Its People from Life by Artists Known and Unknown (Richmond: Dietz Printing Co., 1956).

Davis, Deering, Stephen P. Dorsey and Ralph Cole Hall. Alexandria Houses 1750 - 1830 (New York: Architectural Book Publishing Co., Inc., 1946), pp. 112-14.

Moore, Gay Montague. Seaport in Virginia. George Washington's Alexandria (Richmond: Carrett and Massie, Inc., 1949).

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

### A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: A late Federal town house designed in the indigenous manner with particular attention to proportions and refinements of details.
2. Condition of fabric: Well maintained.

### B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Two-and-a-half stories plus cellar, three bays. Front block, approximately 30' x 40' plus rear ell extending about 50'.
2. Foundations: Rubble to grade. Cellar arched partitions follow same plan as floors above. Remnant of brick paving. A modern cellar stair is in a location similar to the original -- under the staircase.
3. Wall construction, finish and color: Brick, Flemish bond with carefully tooled joints on facade, common bond elsewhere. Stone arch with key and stone sills distinguish original windows in main block. A watertable of moulded stone across the front is an unusual refinement which occurs here at a time when the watertable itself is beginning to disappear locally.
4. Porches, stoop, bulkheads: Aquia stone stoop and steps with nosing, wrought iron railing with turned balusters, brass finials; wrought iron foot-scraper. Opening to cellar at sidewalk level shows up in 1936 photograph, but has since been eliminated.
5. Chimneys: A pair of high inside end chimneys at south end of front block. The ell chimney serving the original kitchen is an original feature; a second in the more recent hyphen is rather recent.
6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: The wooden doorway is a smaller and simplified version of that of the City Hotel addition at Cadsby's Tavern. The keystone is reeded; the jambs are flush paneled and the door itself has

eight panels, recessed outside and in, but in slight relief against the background.

- b. Windows and shutters: The windows for the most part are twelve-over-twelve light double-hung sash. The nature of the property and the openness at the north permitted the installation of windows to the improvement of interior lighting. There are fixed slat shutters on front.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Gable roof with paired dormers front and rear. The front dormers are pilastered and have round-headed sash. A trapdoor in the roof and accompanying weathering of the slate suggest that the house may have had a widow's or Captain's Walk, a feature which is recalled by some of the oldest inhabitants. A ladder leads from the attic to the space above.
- b. Cornice: An arched and coved cornice with underlying dentil moulding is an unusual type in Alexandria.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: The town house plan with side-hall is characteristic, but the original kitchen was built as a dependency. The hyphen where it was joined to the main house was rounded so as not to interfere with the windows upstairs and down. This long two-story ell with one-story extension supplies comfortable living quarters. A later kitchen wing, now modernized and extended by a frame addition, opens off the dining room.
- 2. Wall and ceiling finish: Plastered walls and ceilings with simple plaster cornices in the hall and parlor.
- 3. Doorways and doors: Fluted pilasters and keyed archway frame the simple stairway with square balusters. The rounded handrail of southern pine sets the half-round motif for the chair rail which ascends all the way to the finished attic. In the front hall the chair rail exhibits an unusual triple gouging and that in the parlor has a guilloche design.

The original doors have six recessed panels on each side and the jambs on the first floor accord with this treatment.

4. Special decorative features, trim, cabinet work: Simple architrave mouldings. In the parlor the windows are recessed and the paneled jambs and the folding shutters show the same treatment as the door; likewise there are interior shutters in the dining room.
5. Hardware: Wrought iron and brass box lock hardware. A pair of paneled shutters on kitchen ell have wrought iron strap hinges which may be original.

The wrought iron brackets of snow stops, to be observed in the 1936 photographs, were apparently removed and inserted in the north and south gables for fastening vines.

D. Site:

1. General setting: The Vowell-Snowden-Black House faces eastward on South Lee Street and originally had a clear sweep of the Potomac River below the hill. Most of its half acre site remains, well landscaped with flagstone terrace and grape arbor, rose garden and tennis courts.

A feature of this town estate is an open enclosure along Lee Street consisting of brick piers filled between with low brick wall and wrought iron panels. A high brick wall along Franklin Street affords absolute privacy.

2. Outbuildings: The contemporary brick stable still stands along the Franklin Street line and immediately adjacent is a carriage entrance leading into the grounds.

Prepared by Worth Bailly, Consultant for  
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PART III. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was a cooperative effort of the Historic Alexandria Foundation and the Historic American Buildings Survey to document some of the most important early Alexandria residences for the HABS collection. The historian was Worth Bailey, an Alexandria resident and former HABS employee. Photographs were supplied by Victor Amato. The material was edited in 1975 by Antoinette J. Lee, working on contract with HABS.